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FICINO, AVICENNA AND THE OCCULT POWERS OF THE RATIONAL SOUL

The modern literature on Ficino's magical theory stresses that it is primarily a natural or spiritual magic, i.e., to quote D. P. Walker, "a non-demonic magic, utilizing the *spiritus mundi* and reaching no higher than the human spirit." For Walker, Ficino's magic is entirely subjective in its effects, not transitive: i.e., it is meant to transform the operator rather than to have effects outside the body of the operator such as is the case with "fascination, telepathy, medical incantations, and most of the operations of witchcraft."¹ This subjective natural magic works by focussing the imagination, a power of the lower, body-oriented part of the soul, on the *spiritus*, defined by Ficino as

a certain vapor of the blood, pure, subtle, hot and lucid. And, formed from the subtler blood by the heat of the heart, it flies to the brain, and there the soul assiduously employs it for the exercise of both the interior and exterior senses.²

Spiritus is, in other words, a *tertium quid* between soul and body, extremely rarified and invisible, but still a physical substance. It is by means of *spiritus* that good influences from music, odors, colors, foods and astral influences can be transmitted to the body and bring it into harmony with the soul and physical nature, thus granting it health. Ficino

also dallied with a higher, demonic kind of magic – higher because it used the power of words to address good planetary demons, rational and language-using beings. Walker is at some pains to show that Ficino also practiced (covertly) this kind of demonic magic, despite the dangers of doing so.

The contention of this article is that the above characterization of Ficino's magic is incomplete and distorted because it neglects the more ambitious side of Ficino's magic which is not found in the *De vita* (written 1480s, published 1489) but in two of Ficino's works written more than a decade before the *De vita*, namely his epitomes of the *Laws* (composed 1470s, published 1484) and preeminently in the *Platonic Theology* (composed c. 1474, published 1482). In these works we find a theory of magic derived primarily from Avicenna that emphasizes the extraordinary power over nature that can be exercised by the highest power of the human soul, the *animus* or rational soul, both within one's own body and upon other bodies and indeed upon the whole body of nature.³ Using this more ambitious mental (or angelic) magic the human soul can exploit occult correspondences in the cosmos to cause paranormal phenomena such as telepathy, levitation, prophecy, sorcery, and miracles. This aspect of Ficino's magical theory has not been entirely ignored in the modern secondary literature, but it has typically been seen through the prism of Walker's emphasis on the lower psychic power of imagination or phantasy.⁴ Indeed, thanks to the prestige of two great Warburgians, Frances Yates and D. P. Walker, Ficino's magic has ordinarily been seen as a low-level, gentle, unambitious magic, offering a contrast in this respect with the exalted, power-hungry, cabalistic magic of Pico. Ficino is the magician of the natural world, content with facilitating health and well-being; Pico is the magician of the intelligible world, aiming to exploit angelic forces

to attain unlimited power for the human race.⁵ As we shall see, this is incorrect: Ficino too developed a theory of angelic magic that attributed great power to the human soul, and he did this at least a decade before Pico.⁶ Ficino's magic has been mischaracterized because modern students of his theories of the occult have focussed on the *De vita*, his main work on the subject, which explicitly presents itself as a program for non-demonic, non-transitive operations, limited to healing and harmonizing human nature. Renaissance authors knew better: Gianfrancesco Pico, Pomponazzi, Pedro Mexia, Fabio Paolini and Thomas Erastus all credited Ficino with a transitive soul-magic derived from Avicenna.⁷ And modern students of Avicenna have emphasized that the Arabic philosopher's theory of the occult powers of the prophetic soul is based not only on the soul's power of imagination, but also on its powers of will and intuitive intellect.⁸ This makes it all the more remarkable that modern scholarship has practically ignored this more ambitious strain in Ficino's magical theory.

As is well known, Ficino's magical theory presupposes a Neoplatonic view of the cosmos, both physical and intelligible. Like all Neoplatonic cosmologies it has a high degree of "connectivity" (to use a word from the computer world): it is characterized by a web of sympathies and correspondences and dependencies that hold it together in variegated unity beneath the One. It is this web of correspondences which enables magical operations, ensuring that actions performed in one part of the system will be passed to other parts. Indeed, it is not going too far to say that Ficino's view of creation as a whole is magical, in the sense that nothing occurring anywhere in it is without some influence on the whole. "All Nature is a magician," as Ficino remarks near the end of the *De vita*.⁹ Since the correspondences are "vertical" as well as "horizontal" – i.e. since

physical objects are connected not only by natural sympathies and *spiritus* with other physical objects, but also stand in dependency on *mathematica* and higher immaterial realities – it is possible in principle for physical objects to respond in harmonic unison, as it were, to impulses from those higher realities, rather than by direct physical transmission from one bodily thing to another via *spiritus*. It is this vertical connectivity which enables the magical powers of the rational soul to act upon physical nature.

It may, of course, be debated whether paranormal powers of the soul are properly described as magical, but to answer this question would lead us into the learned maze of definitional and methodological questions regarding magic that would admit of no universally satisfactory resolution. Personally I doubt that Ficino would have strongly distinguished between the paranormal powers of the soul and the magical influences latent in material objects and transmitted through Spirit. They were all windows on the world's wonder; all part of the same system interpenetrated at every point with divine power and open at every point to manipulation by strong souls and persons with knowledge of the occult relations subsisting between the several parts of the cosmos. The soul is not peripheral to nature, but the central part of the cosmic machine, connected with everything above and below it in the order of nature. In a marvellous image, Ficino compares the soul in the cosmos to the fetus in the womb:

Through its head, that is, its mind, our soul is bound to higher minds; through its lowest power, the idolum, with which it rules the body, our soul is in accord with the idola of the higher souls; and through its body's nature into which the idolum is woven, our soul is united with the natures of the world's bodies – natures prior to this body's nature. Thus we are bound to the whole machine [of the world] by these three ropes, as it were: by our mind to minds, by our idolum to idola, and by

our nature to natures. Similarly the fetus in the womb is bound to the whole maternal body by way of connected cords, whence through its soul, body and spirit it also perceives the passions of the mother's soul, body and spirit (13.2.16, tr. Allen, with slight adjustments).

* * *

That the rational soul can act directly on nature – the principle of non-material causation – is an Avicennian principle that was rejected in the course of the thirteenth century by Peripatetic philosophers, including Albert and Thomas, who saw it as contradicting the Aristotelian principle that physical causation requires contact.¹⁰ Ficino not only accepts this Avicennian principle but develops it further. He regards it as possible for souls not only to affect physical nature directly, but also to affect other souls indirectly, via a descent into *spiritus*, in a process I would like to label “redundation” (from *redundare*, the verb Ficino uses to describe the process). Hence in Book III of the *De vita*, Ficino writes:

For since they believe the celestials are not empty bodies but bodies divinely animated and ruled moreover by divine Intelligences, no wonder they believe that as many good things as possible come forth from thence for men, goods pertaining not only to our body and spirit but also flowing back (*redundantia*) somewhat into our souls, and not into our soul from their body but from their soul. (...)

Finally, whenever we say “celestial goods descend to us,” understand (1) that gifts from the celestial *bodies* come into our *bodies* through our rightly-prepared spirit, (2) that even before that, through their rays the same gifts flow into a spirit

exposed to them either naturally or by whatever means [*grace? ascetic practices?*], and (3) that the goods of the celestial *souls* partly leap forth into this our spirit through rays, and from there flow back [*redundare*] into our souls, and partly come straight from their souls or from angels into human souls which have been exposed to them – exposed, I say, not so much by some natural means as by the election of free will or by affection.¹¹

A similar description of “redundation” can be found in Ficino’s argument to Plato’s *Laws* VI:

But if these spirits act on our spirit, they act still more on bodies. But the experience (*passio*) of human bodies, whether it is imported from from these spirits or from higher bodies, flows back (*redundat*) into the soul to the extent that the soul plunges itself into the body through natural or acquired desire. But there is this difference, that these bodies move souls through our bodies, but spirits move souls through bodies *and* through souls *and* also through this spirit, which the doctors often call the knot of soul and body.¹²

It is through this process of redundation that Ficino in the *De vita* explains the influence of Jupiter and Saturn, respectively, on practical and theoretical reasoning.¹³

The indirect circulation of psychic forces through physical objects and back into soul is also, I suspect, how Ficino understands the process of education: of one soul being formed by another through a sensory intermediary. In Book XI, chapter 5 of the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino describes how the Socratic process of teaching is a matter of awakening seeds of knowledge that lie dormant in the minds of students, seeds that have already been implanted by higher divine principles. The teacher is a minister, not a master; Socrates (using the image of the *Theaetetus*) is a midwife, not a father. So much

is familiar from Plato. But Ficino goes further and claims that the mind of Socrates possessed an active, divine power of awakening dormant knowledge in the soul of others:

In the same work [*Theages*] Socrates tells how some people, when they shared his company and were close to him, and *even though he said nothing*, became more acute; similarly, when they left him, they suddenly became duller again. It was as if this their wit's power belonged to some divine influence, which, having streamed down from god, was penetrating the souls of Socrates' friends through the genius and mind of Socrates.

Here Socrates' mind appears to have some supranormal ability to induce ratiocination, mediated somehow by his physical presence.

In the same way, it is a key idea of Ficino's educational theory that youths sunk in the world of sense can be aroused to contemplation by sensory "lures" and "baits", which pique their interest and remind them of the god within. Such lures and baits include the pleasure of literary forms and verse, virtuous companions, natural beauty, music, and other kinds of attractive "packaging" for philosophy.¹⁴ In the *De vita*, Ficino sees these physical manifestations of the divine as magical devices for attracting souls:

And so let no one think that any divinities wholly separate from matter are being attracted by any given mundane materials, but that daemons rather are being attracted and gifts from the ensouled world and from the living stars. Again, let no man wonder that Soul can be allured as it were by material forms, since indeed she herself has created baits of this kind suitable to herself, to be allured thereby, and she always and willingly dwells in them. There is nothing to be found in this whole living world so deformed that Soul does not attend it, that a gift of the Soul is not in it. Therefore Zoroaster called such correspondences of forms to the

reasons existing in the World-soul “divine lures” and Synesius corroborated that they are magical baits.¹⁵

The soul’s occult power of inducing contemplative experience in ensouled beings shows already that psychic magic, too, has two aspects, a subjective one – in which the soul can be influenced by higher powers via a physical or spirit medium – as well as a transitive one. That is, through alienation, asceticism, sleep, or in other states of separation from the physical, the human soul can acquire a range of paranormal abilities that are beyond the experience of ordinary mortals. Thus in the *Platonic Theology* (9.2.2) Ficino explains how many at the point of death acquire the ability to predict future events, as Socrates predicted the downfall and death of his accusers. (Ficino gives here half-a-dozen historical examples). The soul once out of the body is free from the constraints of time and space, and acquires greater freedom (and therefore power), clairvoyance, and powers of prophecy and telepathy. While Ficino’s general theory is dependent on Avicenna, as we shall see, he seems in this passage to be indebted to Plutarch’s *De genio Socratis* (589B) where Socrates’ *daimonion* has such intense ratiocinative powers that these are transmitted to Socrates, who is able to receive its thoughts as though his soul possessed some special antennae. The soul in separation from the body becomes so strong that it is able to resist the attacks of sorcerers upon it, as Plotinus resisted the attacks of the magician Olympius and indeed turned his enchantments back upon him.¹⁶

* * *

A major unexploited source for the occult powers of the soul in Ficino's writings comes in the arguments and epitomes to his translation of Plato's *Laws*. In the epitome to the fifth book, Ficino begins by remarking that we are daily surrounded by miracles in nature – the magnet, flintstones that strike sparks, gunpowder – and indeed by the whole of nature, the motion of the heavens and the artful construction of the universe. We are ignorant of the causes of these wonders, yet we do not deny their effects. No more should we deny the wonders performed by our souls in prodigies and oracles, for these too are attested by history and by “Mercurial, Pythagorean and Platonic authority.” Ficino then proceeds to find a metaphysical explanation for these phenomena. He notes that elements and spirits are the more efficacious the higher they rise in the scale of being, so pure elemental fire is more powerful than fire trapped in the terraqueous globe. Heavenly light is more powerful than fire, and spirit more powerful than the heavens, for spirit gives life to and moves the heaven, or at least accompanies them in their life and movement. These higher celestial spirits are also our *consortes*, and act on our souls through influx of images, like a faces in a mirror. In this way they make our souls resemble them, so that our souls operate in ways nearly as marvelous as the celestial spirits.¹⁷ Ficino does not cite an authority here, but the image of the mirror was a favorite one with Avicenna, who used it to explain how the soul's higher cognitive powers could be activated by (without being causally dependent on) sensible natures.¹⁸ Ficino employs it in a similar way, as an image to illustrate how *spiritus*, which is a physical vapor (however rarified), can be the occasion of knowledge in an immaterial soul.

But just as mirrors are prepared to receive images by their clear, smooth, glassy nature, so our souls may be prepared for the influx of higher forces, the divinities

(*numina*). Our souls are prepared in that their nature is intellectual, in that they cling to the divine certainties through faith, they move themselves towards them in most ardent love, and they firmly remember them in hope.¹⁹ Finally, if our souls have bodies naturally accommodated to them and carefully readied for them (e.g., through asceticism), certain *instinctus* slip down from the these deities (*superi*) into our minds, like vibrations transmitted from the strings of one lyre to another lyre similarly attuned. (The image is from Plotinus 4.4.42, where it is used to describe the power of prayer.) It is thus that marvels, dreams, prophecies and oracles come to us.

Ficino then raises the possibility, citing Iamblichus and Porphyry, that these phenomena might be daemonically induced (with a string of *forte*'s which show his uncertainty or perhaps his fear of being charged with heterodoxy). A second possibility he raises is that occult forces at particular times and places convert the intentions of human minds to higher things and form those converted minds in the light of higher intelligent powers.

Human minds are naturally distracted towards variety, but whenever they use their full power for a particular work, then – just as fire when oriented towards the heavens burns with the full force of its nature – so (Plato has no doubt) do our minds easily produce marvels greater than fire or heaven. ... Thus is that saying of the Gospel mightily confirmed, that our faith shall move mountains, and thus also are confirmed many things that Plato asserts [in the fourth and fifth book of the *Laws*] about oracles²⁰

Ficino is here asserting that our rational souls, appropriately prepared by alienation from the body, can be directly attuned to receive the power of the intelligences beyond the

heavens, and that these deities (probably to be identified with Ideas in Nous or Angel) can impart to the highest parts of our soul certain paranormal powers, including the power to perform wonders and to predict the future.²¹

* * *

By far the most extensive discussion of the occult powers of the rational soul, however, occurs in Book XIII of the *Platonic Theology*, where Ficino is trying to prove the soul's immortality by documenting its supra-physical powers and the tendency of those powers to increase the more the soul is separated from the body. In so doing he elaborates a naturalistic theory of such paranormal phenomena as psychosomatic effects, telepathy, clairvoyance, the evil eye, visions, prophecy, and miracles. Miracles are defined as alterations to natural species, and among the miracles discussed are the power to command elements, change the weather, heal the sick, cast charms and spells, destroy another's health through the use of the evil eye, perform acts of sorcery, and to levitate. All of these occult powers belong to the realm of soul-magic rather than naturalistic or demonic magic because they require the activity of a strong soul working directly, by non-material causation, on physical objects.²² Ficino's theory here is heavily indebted to Avicenna's naturalistic account of the "sacred faculty" of prophecy in the *De anima* and *Metaphysics*, a circumstance that raises questions about the Florentine's relationship to Christian orthodoxy, as we shall see. Indeed, the fact that Avicenna is rarely named throughout this book despite his omnipresence in it may be a sign that Ficino was uncertain how his views would be received by ecclesiastical authorities.

One of the few passages where Ficino does mention Avicenna is in 13.4.2, a paragraph where the Florentine defends his naturalistic theory of miracles and shows how it relates to the entire system laid out in the *Platonic Theology*:

Perhaps you will be surprised if I inquire into the reasons behind miracles. But listen to me. In the first book it was argued that there is a third essence under the angel but above the whole matter of the world, an essence which is formed by the divinity but itself forms matter, and which receives spiritual forms from the divinity but gives corporeal forms to matter. In the third book it was also established that the third essence is nothing other than [all] rational souls, both our souls and souls higher than ours. It follows that for the Platonists and the followers of Avicenna every rational soul through its essence and power is above the whole matter of the world and can move and form the whole – when that is, it becomes God’s instrument for doing so.²³

The passage states the main theoretical principle for Ficino’s theory of soul magic, that the soul’s position in the universe gives it control over the matter of the universe, not just the matter of the individual ensouled body. This point underlies Ficino’s account of how the soul, being a substance, can free itself from bodily influences and acquire power over nature. The soul is by nature superior to bodies and can control all bodily things, but because of a certain fatal love and desire for rule, particular souls ordinarily devote themselves to particular bodies. The soul loses power while in the body because it is distracted with bodily cares “But if that particular instinct ceases, the life-giving power

becomes free to be affected by a new instinct and in a way to rule and move another body (13.4.3).”

Ficino uses in this passage the scholastic concepts of the intention and remission of forms, concepts elaborated in the fourteenth century by writers like Buridan and the Oxford “Calculators” to explain how forms, qualities, and quantities can intensify or relax in particular subjects without changing their essence, e.g., how heat can increase or decrease in an iron bar without losing its character as heat.²⁴ Ficino uses the terminology somewhat idiosyncratically to describe variations in the intimacy of the soul’s relationship with the body. It is possible under certain circumstances for the rational soul, whose *idolon* is the form of the body, to remit its presence in the body and turn to divine things; when it does so its power increases and it is able to affect other bodies besides its own:

In short, since the reason is superior to the phantasy, when the reason is dedicated totally to God and directed to the one work of bestowing a benefit [e.g. healing], then the earlier natural desire of the rational soul joining it to its own body is fully remitted [*remittitur admodum*]: released from its own body, the rational soul acts upon another (13.4.11, tr. Allen with slight adjustments).

This is an adequate explanation for how the soul does good works that affect other bodies. But it does not help explain how unreligious or even wicked souls like those of sorcerers sometimes are able to affect other bodies, for example through the use of the “evil eye”. That was an important issue for Avicenna, too, who needed to find a theoretical basis for distinguishing Mohammed’s miracles from those of a sorcerer.²⁵ Ficino’s solution resembles Avicenna’s in denying that the sorcerer has any access to

divine power. Ficino cites (from Pliny the Elder) the examples of Illyrians and Triballi and Scythian women who could strike people dead by looking at them. These evils souls are effective outside of their own bodies, not because divine power draws them upwards and out of the body, but because the very intensity of their hatred for someone else remits the soul's bond of affection with its own body.

For when one emotion becomes inflamed, another cools off. Therefore in the intensifying of the malefic phantasy (*in maleficae phantasiae intensione*) the natural affection of the soul, which binds it to its body, is briefly remitted (*remittitur paulisper*), with the result that, freed to a greater degree from its body, it begins to transmute the new material to which it has just been attracted, as if to some new body of its own (13.4.9).

But most of Ficino's discussion is reserved for the good species of "strong souls", of which there are four: philosophers, poets, priests and prophets (13.2.1-8). These are the kinds of men who are capable of alienation from the body and therefore of acting as conduits of divine power. Ficino finds plenty of material in the Platonic tradition and especially in the *Phaedrus* to document the ability of the first three classes of men to abstract themselves from the body. It is in his account of seers and prophets, by far the longest discussion of the four, that he relies most heavily on Avicenna; it is here that he first discusses the occult powers of the enraptured rational soul.

As examples of prophetic powers Ficino lists the predictions of Diotima in the *Symposium*, the sibyls, the Delphic Oracle, prophetic dreams "experienced by everyone", and the predictions of the Hebrew prophets. By leaving the body behind the rational soul enters the timeless world of Mind (or Angel) and thus acquires the power to see the future

– to predict the recurrence of ages, mutations of realms, rainstorms and earthquakes (13.2.1, 23). The human mind climbs above fate, which rules nature, and is subject only to Providence. Like other minds in the order of Providence it is not ruled, but rules itself. “Thus the soul is positioned with regard to the laws of providence, fate and nature, not now as a passive subject, but as an active agent” (13.2.17).

Human beings acquire the power of prophecy by laying themselves open to the influence of higher minds. This happens in one of seven states of *vacatio*: “in sleep, in syncope or swoon, in the melancholic humor, in the tempered complexion, in solitude, in wonder and in chastity” (13.2.24). In these states the spirits or vapors used in sensation and motion are banished to the outer limbs and the soul is left in isolation from the body. These states, too are described in terms of intension and remission: “To the extent that external activity is increasingly remitted, however, internal activity is more and more intensified.”

This account of the seven kinds of *vacatio* is taken from many sources but the theory behind it is Avicennian as well as some of the categories of askesis and certain other details.²⁶ Avicenna believed that some exceptional human minds, “holy minds,” had a special aptitude, when abstracted from the body, to be illuminated by the agent intellect (Ficino’s divine *numina*) and so to grasp the middle terms of syllogisms, that is, the first principles of necessary reasoning, even without having been taught.²⁷ This theory is clearly in the background of Ficino’s own explanation of the power of prophecy, though both thinkers are also drawing on Plotinus. As far as Ficino’s categories of *vacatio* are concerned, sleep, swoon and the tempered complexion are explicitly given by Avicenna as forms of askesis leading to prophetic experiences.²⁸ Other details of Ficino’s

account probably taken from Avicenna include the assertion that morning dreams are more veridical (13.2.29); that Hercules and “very many Arabs who were seized by epilepsy” were particularly good at the interpretation of dreams (13.2.32); and the explanations of how our daily activities and concerns influence what is revealed to us in dreams (13.2.26-29).²⁹

* * *

Avicenna’s theories of prophetic power were based not only on the lower power of the imagination and the higher, intuitive power of the “sacred mind” in askesis to be illuminated by the agent intellect. He also described a third kind of prophetic power based in the will which allowed the prophet to perform wonders and miracles such as healing the sick, raising winds, causing rain and fertility, dispelling mists, and changing elemental species. Ficino adopts this aspect of Avicenna’s magic as well, discussing it most fully in *Platonic Theology* XIII, chapter 4.

Ficino begins with relatively humble examples of how the soul, operating through *spiritus*, is able to change foreign bodies. He cites the example of our digestive system altering the foods we eat and a woman’s womb shaping a fetus. Gradually we work up to more powerful transitive acts where the soul acts more and more directly on bodies external to itself. Ficino considers the famous Avicennian theory of the evil eye (13.4.8), which was much discussed in Western sources since the thirteenth century; Ficino explains this as an intensifying of febrile or choleric spirits in the sorcerer’s fantasy, which then is conveyed by *spiritus* through the eyes to its victim.³⁰ The sorcerer’s power

comes from his astrological sign and from the peculiar mixture of humors in his body. In much the same way Ficino explains the power of the Ethiopian catablepas and the basilisk, fabulous animals that can kill with their sight.

These examples may appear at first sight compatible with the conventional model of Ficino's spiritual magic (though in fact at 13.4.9 Ficino says they are examples of the power of the rational soul over other bodies). But the next examples (13.4.10) take us unquestionably into the realm of psychic and mental magic. As the soul remits its presence in the body it acquires the power to bring blessings not only on its own body, but on those of others. When the reason "is fixed upon some good work and the soul is wholly intent on God," men with special gifts, "with a tempered and celestial complexion," men "nourished by pure foods," the "doctors of mankind," are able through prayer to bestow benefits such as health and healing on their own and other bodies. As examples of psychic healers Ficino cites Apollonius of Tyana, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Philolaus; as his theoretical authority he cites Plato in the *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus*, *Epinomis* and *Republic* (13.4.11). These dialogues (he says) establish the sovereignty of the pious reason over "tyrannic phantasy", the freedom of the intellectual soul to wander the universe and govern the world with the other celestial souls, and the power of soul joined to mind to issue the decrees of fate. But the parallel passage in Avicenna's *De anima* is obviously much more germane to Ficino's theoretical model than these rather strained allusions to Platonic dialogues.³¹

In its final step (13.4.12) the human soul is able to quiet the phantasy, ignore discursive reason and live in its highest power of intuitive reason alone. When this happens the soul becomes angel (or an angel: *evadit angelus*) and seizes God with its

whole heart.³² Ficino assimilates this to the “theology of the divine John” when he says the latter describes the rebirth of the soul from God. The influence of God streams down through the angelic minds and moves the soul to lay aside its lower psychic powers and become angel. “He who commits himself entirely to this inspiration ceases to be a soul and becomes, being reborn from God, a son of God, an angel.”

Ficino goes on (13.4.13):

If the soul naturally surpasses the world machine, and if it performs wonders even in foreign bodies through its inferior powers, what do we suppose it will do when it ascends to its head and emerges as angelic? ... The soul will no longer be bewitching just one body or a young body or be healing a sick man; it will then govern the spheres of the elements.

Whereas before it only moved the four humors of the body, now it can move the four elements of the whole world, as though it were a World Soul.

With that power alone, therefore, it will, under God’s command, rouse the winds and drag clouds into the clear sky and compel them to rain; then it will allay the winds and clear the air.³³

It is only at this point that Ficino acknowledges Avicenna, though he maintains that authority for these angelic powers in the human soul can also be found in Avicbron, “Egyptians” (presumably Hermes), Plutarch, Porphyry, Proclus and Zoroaster. The theory of the angelic powers of the soul provides him with an allegorical key to explain reports that Zoroaster was able to surround his body with rays of light and levitate; it also does service to explain Hermes Trismegistus’ account of regeneration, Elijah’s fiery

chariot, Paul's rapture to the third heaven, and the glorified body that the saved will receive at the Last Judgement (13.4.14-16). Ficino ends the discussion (13.5.1-8) by claiming that this conception of the angelic powers of the human soul does not conflict with Divine Providence or Christianity. His final words on the subject (13.5.8) are the words he customarily employs when treading on dangerous ground:

But individual points concerning miracles, points we have discussed from a Platonic viewpoint (*ex Platoniorum mente*), we affirm only insofar as they are approved by Christian theologians.

* * *

Ficino was very familiar indeed with one important Christian theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, who is cited explicitly and implicitly throughout the *Platonic Theology*.³⁴ So it is improbable that he would not have known that Thomas, along with St. Albert the Great and Giles of Rome, had condemned the relevant doctrines of Avicenna in the later thirteenth century. Partly this was because, as Aristotelians, they did not approve of the idea of non-material causation; but also there were theological objections.³⁵ In his *De veritate*, question 12, and in the *Summa theologiae* 2-2, qq. 171-4, Thomas attacked Avicenna's position as too naturalistic; for Thomas, prophecy can only happen *in virtute divina*, not through any natural human power. He himself makes a strong distinction between divine prophecy, a gift of the Holy Spirit, and natural prophecy, which relies on the imaginative and intellectual faculties and their contact with celestial forces and separated substances. In other words, he provides a standard to distinguish the Judaeo-Christian prophetic tradition from non-Christian prophecy. This is

exactly what Ficino does not do. Throughout the passages we have examined Ficino constantly reduces pagan, Jewish, Christian and Muslim manifestations of the prophetic faculty to the same theoretical model. We have already mentioned Ficino's list of strong souls with prophetic powers, which includes the Hebrew prophets along with Diotima, Socrates, Epimenides, the sibyls, the Delphic oracle (13.2.8). But in discussing inspired dream interpreters Ficino lumps Joseph and Daniel with Hermes Trismegistus (13.2.31); and in describing souls divinely illuminated because of their tempered complexions he illustrates his account with the examples of Pherecydes of Syros, Pythagoras, and Plotinus (13.2.34). Zoroaster and Orpheus are examples of divinatory powers acquired from solitude (13.2.36); St. John the Evangelist, Ezekial and Isaiah are examples of visions acquired from "the chastity of a mind devoted to God" (13.2.37); and angelic transformation was experienced by Zoroaster, Elijah and St. Paul (13.4.16).

Giles of Rome (d. 1316) also had serious theological reservations about Avicenna's naturalistic accounts of sorcery and prophecy. In the *Errores philosophorum* attributed to him³⁶ he condemns Avicenna for "believing that the evil eye is true, and that the soul operates not only in its own body but on others'." ... "Furthermore he errs concerning prophecy ... he speaks ill because it appears he holds that prophecy is natural, and he holds that prophecy flows down to us because of the relationship our soul has to supercelestial souls and to the last intelligence."³⁷ Paola Zambelli has pointed out that article 112 of the *Condemnation of 1277*, condemning the doctrine that higher souls can imprint their powers on lower souls and the sensitive soul, is probably a confused attack on Avicennian magical and psychosomatic teachings.³⁸

In short, Ficino must have known he was pushing the envelope of orthodox Christian theology in espousing these more ambitious magical theories, and the concealment of his heavy debt to Avicenna may well have been designed to evade unwanted attention from the authorities. A few years after he published the *Platonic Theology* he came under investigation by the Inquisition for his magical writings,³⁹ and it is evident that his astrological teachings also challenged the medieval theological tradition.⁴⁰ So it should be no surprise that when he published his work on magic, the *De vita*, shortly after this episode, he should have emphasized the less controversial aspects of his magical teachings, focussing on *spiritus* and the lower psychic power of *imaginatio*, where he ran less risk of incurring ecclesiastical censure. He may, too, have been discouraged by the example of Galeotto Marzio whose *De promiscua doctrina*, which contained explicit references to Avicennian magic, was condemned around this time.⁴¹ Whatever the reason, in assessing the character and development of Renaissance magic, modern scholars should not forget that just a few years earlier Ficino had published a work containing a far more ambitious and dangerous magical theory. When it came to asserting the dignity of man and his potential to exercise angelic and godlike powers, Ficino was no less radical than his student, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

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NOTES TO HANKINS ARTICLE

¹ D. P. WALKER, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, London 1958, reprint University Park, Pennsylvania, 2000, p. 149. See also the excellent overview of Renaissance magic by B. P. COPENHAVER in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. C. B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhardt Kessler, Jill Kraye, Cambridge 1988, p. 285: “If *spiritus* is the basic medium for Ficino’s magic, man’s chief magical faculty is the imagination.” The same view of Ficino’s magic is found in Wayne SCHUMAKER, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, Berkeley 1972, pp. 120-133.

² Marsilio FICINO, *Opera omnia*, Basel 1576, p. 496, cited by WALKER, *Magic*, p. 3.

³ We know Ficino possessed an unspecified work of Avicenna, because in 1486 he wrote to Pico asking him to return the book; see *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorno di Platone*, ed. S. Gentile, S. Niccoli and P. Viti, Florence 1984, p. 78, no. 60. The Medici library had a thirteenth-century copy of the *De anima* (Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, Plut. 84, 17). The latter text was first printed in Pavia in 1485, but Ficino must have known the work long before that date. M.-T. D’ALVERNY, *Avicenna Latinus codices*, with addenda by Simone van Riet and Pierre Jodogne, Louvain-la-Neuve – Leiden, 1994, p. 410, lists a manuscript formerly owned by Ficino, Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 524, which contains among other texts an excerpt from Avicenna’s books on meteorology. Ficino also cites Avicenna’s *Metaphysics* several times in the *Platonic Theology* (e.g., 13.4.14, 13.5.6, 14.9.3-4). It seems likely that Ficino would have had elective affinities

with a man who, like himself, had been a medical doctor, had been deeply influenced by Platonism, and had made the soul the center of his philosophical inquiries.

⁴ See E. GARIN, *Phantasia e imaginatio fra Marsilio Ficino e Pietro Pompanazzi*, «Giornale critico di filosofia italiana», LXIV, 1985, 351-361; P. ZAMBELLI, *L'immaginazione e il suo potere. Da al-Kindi, al-Farabi e Avicenna al Medioevo latino e al Rinascimento*, in *Orientalische Kultur und europäisches Mittelalter*, ed. A. Zimmerman (Miscellanea Mediaevalia 17), Berlin-New York 1985, pp. 188-206.

Walker, Garin and Zambelli were all aware of the passages in the *Laws* and in *Platonic Theology XIII* to be discussed below, but they seemed to have come to them indirectly, through citations in Pomponazzi's *De incantationibus*, Gianfrancesco Pico and Thomas Erastus.

⁵ Frances A. YATES, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London 1964, pp. 84f.

⁶ So it is not the case that Pico wrote his magical works before Ficino composed his, as is maintained by S. A. FARMER, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486). The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems, with text, translation and commentary*, Tempe (Arizona) 1998, pp. 118-120. We know, in fact, that Pico requested a copy of the *Platonic Theology* from Ficino when it was printed in 1482. See P. VITI, *Pico, Poliziano e l'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento* (Studi Pichiani, 2), Florence 1994, pp. 127, 129-30 (by S. Gentile).

⁷ See ZAMBELLI, *L'immaginazione*; Garin, *Phantasia*; WALKER, *Magic*, pp. 126, 144, 162-163. Though Walker knows that other Renaissance authors attributed to Ficino a transitive soul-magic derived from Avicenna, when he himself describes the sources of

Ficino's magic on pp. 37-44, he mentions Avicenna only in passing, as part of a list of medieval authors who possibly influenced Ficino's ideas about talismans.

⁸ D. GUTAS, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, Leiden 1988, pp. 159-176; Dag Nicolaus HASSE, *Avicenna's De anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul, 1160-1300* (Warburg Institute Studies and Texts, 1), London-Turin 2000, pp. 154-165.

⁹ Marsilio FICINO, *Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with introduction and notes*, ed. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, Binghamton (New York) 1989, p. 385 (III.26).

¹⁰ HASSE, *Avicenna's De anima*, p. 163.

¹¹ FICINO, *On Life*, p. 369 (III.22). I have slightly modified the translation.

¹² FICINO, *Opera*, II, p. 1503-1504.

¹³ FICINO, *De vita*, pp. 357, 365. For other examples of redundancy see FICINO, *Platonic Theology*, ed. and tr. M. J. B. Allen and J. Hankins, 4 vols. to date, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001-2004, p. 170 (13.1.5, 6), p. 184 (13.4.3). Hereafter all references will be to this edition by book, chapter and paragraph number; all translations from this work are by Allen unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ See J. HANKINS, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Leiden 1990, I, pp. 286-87; J. HANKINS, *Marsilio Ficino as a Critic of Scholasticism*, «Vivens homo. Rivista teologica fiorentina» V.2, 1994, 325-334, reprinted in my *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Rome 2003-2004, II, pp. 459-470.

¹⁵ FICINO, *On Life*, p. 245.

¹⁶ PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus*, cap. 10, in P. Henry and H.-R. Swyzer, eds., *Plotini opera*, 3 vols., Paris – Brussels 1951-73, I, p. 15.

¹⁷ FICINO, *Opera*, II, p. 1501.

¹⁸ See Leen SPRUIT, *Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge*. Vol. 1: *Classical Roots and Medieval Discussions*, Leiden 1994, p. 88. See AVICENNA, *Liber de anima seu Sextus de naturalibus*, IV-V, 5.6, ed. S. van Riet (Avicenna Latinus), Louvain-Leiden 1968, 5.6, pp. 146-147.

¹⁹ This of course is the Augustinian triad of intellect, will and memory; see *De Trinitate*, Book XII, passim.

²⁰ FICINO, *Opera*, II, p. 1501.

²¹ It is clear that Ficino believed himself to possess such paranormal powers, for example in his famous letter to Sixtus IV (*Opera*, I, p. 813 = *Ep.* VI.9) where he and four fellow philosophers, *prophetiae et astrologiae pariter studiosi*, claimed to have predicted the election of Sixtus and delivered a series of prophecies about the coming crisis, the defeat of the Turk and the return of the Golden Age.

²² See 13.3.38 where Ficino explicitly states that the soul does not need the body to perform its miraculous deeds. Also 13.4.9: “Why should your body be less subject to the soul of another than to the body of another? Why not more subject, since the soul is more potent and does not want means via which to act?”

²³ Compare AVICENNA, *De anima* 5.6, ed. van Riet, p. 143: “Intellectus enim noster est intellectus efficiens formas et creans illas.”

²⁴ The classic account is Annaliese MAIER, *Zwei Grundprobleme der scholastischen Naturphilosophie*, Rome 1968; see also Edith SYLLA, *Medieval Concepts of the Latitude*

of *Forms*, «Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du M^oyen Age», XL, 1973, 223-85.

²⁵ HASSE, *Avicenna's De anima*, p. 160.

²⁶ Especially AVICENNA, *De anima* 4.2, ed. van Riet, p. 14.

²⁷ Ibid., 5.6, ed. van Riet, p. 153: "Possibile est ergo ut alicuius hominis anima eo quod est clara et cohaerens principiis intellectibilibus, ita sit inspirata ut accendatur ingenio ad recipiendum omnes quaestiones ab intelligentia agente, aut subito, aut paene subito, firmiter impressas, non probabiliter, sed cum ordine qui comprehendit medios terminos (probata quae sciuntur ex suis causis non sunt intelligibilia). Et hic est unus modus prophetiae qui omnibus virtutibus prophetiae altior est. Unde congrue vocatur virtus sancta, quia est altior gradus inter omnes virtutes humanas." The whole passage from pp. 148-153 is relevant to Ficino's theory. M. HEITZMANN, *L'agostinismo avicennizante e il punto di partenza della filosofia di Marsilio Ficino*, «Giornale storico della filosofia italiana» XVI, 1935, 295-322, 460-480, and XVII, 1936, 1-11, sees Ficino as a late representative of Gilson's thirteenth-century tradition of "augustinisme avicennisante", which identifies the agent intellect with God as the source of divine illumination. This is a serious distortion of Ficino's historical and doctrinal position, but the unorthodoxy of this Avicennian view may help explain why Ficino did not call more attention to debt to Avicenna in these passages of Book XIII.

²⁸ AVICENNA, *De anima* 4.2, ed. van Riet, pp. 15, 32.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 32 (veridical dreams in morning); pp. 18, 26 (examples of the Arab epileptics and Hercules); p. 28 (the subjects of prophetic dreams).

³⁰ Compare AVICENNA, *De anima* 4.4, ed. van Riet, p. 65; see also HASSE, *Avicenna's De anima*, pp. 155-174. On p. 290 Hasse gives a list of scholastic writers who discussed this theory.

³¹ *De anima* 4.4, ed. van Riet, pp. 65-66: "... immo cum anima fuerit constans, nobilis, similis principiis, oboediet ei materia quae est in mundo et patietur ex ea, et invenietur in materia quicquid formabitur in illa. Quod fit propter hoc quod anima humana, sicut postea ostendemus, non est impressa in materia sua, sed est providens ei. Et quandoquidem propter hunc modum colligationis potest ipsa permutare materiam corporalem ab eo quod expetebat natura eius, tunc non est mirum si anima nobilis et fortissima transcendat operationem suam in corpore proprio ut, cum non fuerit demersa in affectum illius corporis vehementer et praeter hoc fuerit naturae praevalentis constantis in habitu suo, sanet infirmos et debilitet pravos et contingat privari naturas et permutari sibi elementa, ita ut quod non est ignis fiat ei ignis, et quod non est terra fiat ei terra, et pro voluntate eius contingant pluviae et fertilitas sicut contingit absorbitio a terra et mortalitas, et hoc totum proveniat secundum necessitatem intelligibilem. Omnino enim possibile est ut comitetur eius velle esse id quod pendet ex permutatione materiae in contraria: nam oboedit ei naturaliter et fit ex ea secundum quod videtur eius voluntati; materia etenim omnino est oboediens animae et multo amplius oboedit animae quam contrariis agentibus in se."

³² It will be remembered that 'angel' is Ficino's name for the hypostasis of Nous below the one. Ficino's use of this term has long puzzled scholars, and is usually thought to reflect the influence of the pseudo-Dionysius, but it might also have been taken from Avicenna – see for example the passage from *On the Rational Soul*, translated by GUTAS,

Avicenna, p. 76: “But when a person expends all his efforts to purify [his rational soul] through knowledge, acquires the propensity for contact with the divine effluence (i.e., with the intellectual substance which is the medium of the divine effluence and which is called ‘angel’ in the language of Revelation and ‘active intellect’ in philosophical terminology), has a balanced temperament, and lacks those opposites that hinder his reception of the divine effluence, then there comes about in him a certain similarity to the celestial bodies and he resembles in his purity the seven mighty ones, i.e. the seven celestial spheres.”

³³ See previous note for the parallel passage in Avicenna’s *De anima*. AVICENNA’S *Metaphysics* 10.1, ed. van Riet, p. 523, also has a discussion of the power of noble human souls, *aptus ad ordinem prophetiae*, to hear the voice of God through angelic voices.

³⁴ See Ardis B. COLLINS, *The Secular is Sacred: Platonism and Thomism in Marsilio Ficino’s Platonic Theology*, The Hague 1947.

³⁵ For the following I am indebted to HASSE, *Avicenna’s De anima*, pp. 173-4.

³⁶ The attribution has been doubted: see C. LUNA, *Un nuovo documento del conflitto tra Bonifacio VII e Filippo il Bello: il discorso ‘De potentia domini pape’ di Egidio Romano* «Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale», III (1992), 167-243; 491-559.

³⁷ GILES OF ROME (?), *Errores philosophorum*, ed. J. Kock (Milwaukee 1944), 6.11, p. 30 and 6.16, pp. 32 and 34, cited by Hasse, *Avicenna’s De anima*, p. 174.

³⁸ ZAMBELLI, *L’immaginazione*, p. 200.

³⁹ Paul Oskar KRISTELLER, *Marsilio Ficino and the Roman Curia*, in *Roma humanistica: Studia in honorem revdi. adm. dni. dni. Iosaei Ruyschaert*, ed. J. Ijsewijn, Leuven 1985, pp. 83-98, reprinted in Kristeller’s *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, Rome

1996, pp. 265-281; see esp. 275-76, on Ficino's fear of the Inquisition even before publishing the *De vita* and his consequent addition of two apologetic letters at the end of the work.

⁴⁰ In particular Ficino maintained the doctrine of the animation of the heavens (see *Platonic Theology* 15.5.8), which had come to be seen as unorthodox by Christian theologians from the thirteenth century onwards; see Richard C. DALES, *The De-animation of the Heavens in the Later Middle Ages*, «Journal of the History of Ideas», XLI, 1980, 531-550, and Edward GRANT, *Planets, Stars and Orbs: The Medieval Cosmos, 1200-1687*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 474-487; see esp. p. 477: "From the fourteenth century on ... scholastics overwhelmingly opposed the attribution of life to celestial bodies".

⁴¹ Eugenio GARIN, *Lo Zodaico della vita: la polemica sull'astrologia dal Trecento al Cinquecento*, Rome-Bari 1982, pp. 48, 136, 139.